DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 401 FL 008 906

AUTHOR Stephens, Don S.
TITLE Foreign Language Grammar for Reading Comprehension: Some Hypotheses. Occasional Papers on Linguistics, No. 1.
INSTITUTION Southern Illinois Univ., Carbondale. Dept. of Linguistics.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 7p.; Proceedings of the International Conference on Frontiers in Language Proficiency and Dominance Testing (1st, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, April 21-23, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Form Classes (Languages); *Grammar; *Language Instruction; Language Patterns; Morphology (Languages); Psycholinguistics; *Reading Comprehension; *Second Language Learning; Sentence Structure; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an innovative method for teaching reading comprehension in a second language. The underlying assumption of this method is that a student who reads in his native language does not need to learn a theoretical system of grammar rules in the traditional sense of the term, since he already possesses the ability to recognize words in terms of grammatical function, an ability which is taken to constitute the foundation for reading in the target language. Instead of being trained in a system of grammar theory before beginning to read the foreign language, students are trained at a very early stage in grammatical awareness, a training calculated to stress that mature readers of a native language already know quite a bit about an historically related foreign language. The program is based on three kinds of exercises: (1) identifying major segments of a sentence; (2) reworking complex sentences into simple, independent clauses; and (3) rote learning of a limited number of morphological distinctions which seem to be essential for reading comprehension. Results of this method seem to be: (1) good scores on the Modern Language Association Reading and Listening Comprehension Test; and (2) positive attitudes toward Germany and German. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James E. Redden

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM"

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED144401

FOREIGN LANGUAGE GRAMMAR FOR READING COMPREHENSION: SOME HYPOTHESES

Don S. Stephens

What does a student need to know in order to read a foreign language? The answer appears obvious: Don't reading skills in a foreign language naturally develop after listening and speaking skills have been mastered? In the audio-lingual method and also in the cognitive code approach, vocalizing skills were assumed to be predicated on rather precise knowledge of grammatical categories reflected in noun paradigms, verb conjugations, adjective endings, pattern drills, and the like. Exercises in analysis and abstraction thus preceded serious reading.

Research in native language reading has made it clear, however, that the ability to speak a language does not guarantee the ability to read it.[1] It is now painfully evident that there are plenty of native speakers of English who literally cannot read or who read very inadequately despite years of schooling. Increasingly therefore, reading comprehension has come to be viewed in this country as involving special skills which do not follow automatically from speaking knowledge of a language. That is, even if traditional assumptions about the importance of abstract exercises are valid for speaking, they need not be valid for reading a second language.

Because reading comprehension involving a foreign language is not an automatic by-product of oral competence, my initial question must be asked seriously, if we want students to be able to read fluently. Instead of wondering what students need to know in order to read a foreign language, however, I prefer to think of the requirements from a negative point of view: What doesn't a student need to know? Is some of what we teach extraneous to reading? When our primary objective is reading comprehension, is it possible to reduce drastically our demands on students? By thinking of the requirements in this way, we can avoid throwing out everything at once and then being forced to prove that each sequentially added step would have to lead up to an ideal of reading comprehension. That would be an endless process, with no hope of success.

What we can do without depends to some extent on what kind of students we are talking about. If we assume that our students of a second language already know how to read well in their native language, what then do they already know? When the languages in question are closely related ones such as French, German, and Spanish, then American students know a great deal: The Roman alphabet makes it possible to approximate phonology; these languages have many vocabulary items in common, and they share some major syntactic patterns, for example, the verb-object (VO) pattern; most American students have also heard these languages enough to have a rudimentary concept of prosodic patterns. All this means that students can identify, with very little trouble, definite articles, conjunctions, adjectives, nouns, and verbs; to some extent they have the ability to separate components of the sentence or

FL008906

thoughts on the printed page; and, finally, after mastery of a few orthographic variations, students can easily acquire a recognition-vocabulary of literally hundreds of verbs and nouns. The text below will illustrate my point. Do with the remainder of the sentences what has already been done with the English sentence: Circle all verbs; underline all nouns; separate the main thoughts with slashes.

Handout #1

Choose the languages which you do not know. Do the following: Circle all verbs; underline all nouns; separate main thoughts with slashes.

EXAMPLE: Nearly all of the students admitted they have no idea what the Student Senate's primary responsibility is.

1. Die drei liberalen Richter glauben im Grunde, dass in einer Demokratie alle Normen "korrekt und fair" angewendet werden.

2. Het CDA-bestuur verklaarde zich met zorgvuldigheid beraden te hebben over de vraag of en intentieverklaring mogelijk is.

What you have just demonstrated[3] is that the major grammatical elements of this text can be recognized and identified by mature readers of English without elaborate pedagogical exercises and even without mastery of all the rules, paradigms, and structures of those languages. With this exercise, you are already on your way to understanding the sentences of a new language.

At The University of Texas at Austin, we have experimented with a German program emphasizing reading comprehension which is based precisely on these kinds of exercises: First, identifying major segments of a sentence, recognizing important nouns, verbs, and markers of tense or time, such as adverbial expressions or verb morphology for past and perfect tenses; second, reworking complex sentences with dependent clauses into simple, independent clauses; thirdly, rote learning of a limited number of morphological distinctions which seem to be essential for reading comprehension. We selected the following morphological categories: a) singular versus plural--on the basis of noun endings and, in the case of grammatical subjects, on the basis of verb form which marks a plural subject; b) past versus present--on the basis of verb morphology and temporal adverbs; c) subject of the verb versus object of the verb--on the basis of the German definite article or pronoun form which correlates with that definite article. Fourthly, we taught two features of German, as contrasted with English, in terms of translation cues: a) the verb werden, which in German can have three different functions, and b) the subjunctive mood. With both werden and subjunctive forms, students were trained to differentiate on the basis of recognition of morphological differences and to be able to identify subjunctive forms in terms of their meaning rather than in terms of a grammatical

category. (Handout #2 illustrates the learning demands made upon students.)[4] It should be evident that students in this program were required to produce far fewer rules and abstract exercises than is ordinarily the case for beginning students of a foreign language. Since reading comprehension was our goal, we stressed comprehension of material before production in terms of speaking and writing, and we were always careful to keep this comprehension-production dichotemy and not confuse the two skills.

After one school-year, students trained according to these principles were able to achieve good scores on the Modern Language Association Reading and Listening Comprehension Tests. By the end of the second semester, students were performing at the 68th percentile on the basis of the national norm for reading comprehension and at the 70th percentile for listening comprehension. Moreover, these students emerged from the course with a high level of interest in the German language and culture as reflected in our attitudinal testing. Fully 82 per cent of our students expressed the feeling that the course had enhanced their appreciation for contrasts and similarities as concerned German and American cultures. Over 75 per cent of the students felt that the way the course was taught had increased their interest in Germany and the German language.

What do these results indicate? The thesis of this paper and the assumption underlying the Univeristy of Texas experiment was that students who are readers of their native language do not need to learn a theoretical system of grammar rules in the traditional sense of the term, since they already possess the ability to recognize words in terms of grammatical function, an ability which we took to constitute the foundation for reading in the target language.[6] Instead of being trained in a system of grammar theory before beginning to read the foreign language, students are trained at a very early stage in grammatical awareness, a training calculated to stress that mature readers of a native language already know quite a bit about an historically related foreign language.[7]

In order to be consistent, however, we must also ask the following question: What don't the test results indicate or prove? In short, we are, at this time, not ready to articulate a comprehensive theory explaining why our assumptions, hypotheses, or tactics seem to produce the desired results. For example, we are not able to say in theoretical terms if the categories we have chosen to stress are the best categories of all available, nor can we state without reservation if the order in which we teach certain reading strategies is the order par excellence.

Hopefully, in the coming year we will be able to use grant monies to allow us to define a more comprehensive theory of reading grammar. At this time, however, it seems that the tenets of what we call "comprehension-based gramar" are not radically different from the precepts of such teachers as Gouin or the so-called "direct method" of language teaching, namely: that to learn a foreign language, the student needs maximum exposure to that language.[8] If a grammar is considered to be a given set of abstractions about language usage, then

we don't expose students to the language itself when we teach these abstractions. By presenting fewer analytical abstractions, we provide more time for direct experience in actual communication.

What kind of grammar is taught should depend on what students need in order to meet their objectives. Our experience at The University of Texas at Austin indicates that students will benefit if we let what type of grammar we teach be determined by what kind of grammar the students need in order to understand what they read. The direct student benefits indicated by a reading comprehension program such as I have outlined have been improved reading scores on national tests and good attitudinal responses in favor of the target language and culture.

The University of Texas at Austin

NOTES:

[1] Janet K. King, Freda M. Holley & Betty Nance Weber, "A New Reading," Chapter 9 in ACTFL Annual Report, 7 (1975).

[2] A handout had been given to the audience before the paper was read. The answers to the two unmarked sentences are given below. This "test" was formulated according to practices common to many FL aptitude tests.

Die drei liberalen Richter glauben im Grunde, dass in einer Demokratie alle Normen "korrekt und fair" angewendet werden.

Het CDA-bestuur verklaarde zich met zorgvuldigheid beraden te hebben over de vraag of een intentieverklaring mogelijk is.

[3] A cursory poll of the audience indicated that nearly everyone had scored at least over 50% correct.

[4] Handout #2 is reproduced below:

A. German verb werden (3 different functions)

Grammatical Category	Student Cues	Student Learns
1. Future auxiliary (form of werden + infinitive)		
Das Auto wird fahren.	. . .wird __fahren	"will . . ."
2. Infinitive meaning "to become" "to get."		
Das Auto wird alt.	wird (used alone)	"becomes"
3. Passive auxiliary (form of werden + past participal)		
Das Auto wird gefahren.	. . .wird gefahren	"is being . . ."

B. German subjunctive mood (Subjunctive II)

Students are taught to recognize Subjunctive II when German adds an umlaut to all verbs, except 2 modals and verbs with weak endings. Students are taught that verbs in this form = infinitive meaning + "would," "should," "could," or "ought to."

[5] See, among others: James J. Asher, Jo Anne Kusudo & Rita de la Torre, "Learning a Second Language through Commands: The Second Field Test," Modern Language Journal, 58, 1-2(January-February, 1974), 24-32;

Janet K. King, et. al., "A New Reading"; Valerion A. Postovsky, "Effects of Delay at the Beginning of Second Language Learning," Modern Language Journal, 58 (September-October, 1974), 229-239; Stephen H. Straight, "Comprehension Versus Production in Linguistic Theory," Foundation of Language, 14 (1976), 525-540.

6 See, among others: Vivian Cook, "The Analogy Between First and Second Language Learning," International Review of Applied Linguistics, 7 (1969), 207-16; John H. Schumann, "The Implications of Interlanguage, Pidginization, and Creolization for the Study of Adult Second Language Acquisition," TESOL Quarterly, 8 (1974), 145-52; Larry Selinker, "Interlanguage," 114-36 in John H. Schumann & Nancy Stetson, eds., New Frontiers in Second Language Learning, (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1975).

7 See, among others: Kenneth S. Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," Journal of the Reading Specialist, 4 (1967), 126-35; Goodman with Frank Smith, "On the Psycholinguistic Method of Teaching Reading," The Elementary School Journal, 71 (1970/71), 177-81; Janet K. King, "Global Inferencing: Reading Unfamiliar Foreign Language Texts Without a Dictionary," Paper read at ACTFL Conference, Denver, Colorado, Nov. 28-30, 1974.

8 John Carroll, The Foreign Language Attainments of Language Majors in the Senior Year: A Survey Conducted in U.S. Colleges and Universities, Cambridge, Mass.: 1967.Unfortunately, Carroll's study does not really indicate how much better student language performance would be if all language courses (literature courses included) had been offered in the foreign language. The report deals only with student estimates of how much foreign language was spoken in first- and second-year courses. The fact remains that measurable gains were found both for those students who started training in high-school and those who began in college when instruction was done in the foreign language and when students were asked to make use of the foreign language themselves.